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Clearing up some of the Mozart-death mystery

Reviewed by
Daniel Webster

1791
Mozart's Last Year
H.C. Robbins Landon
Schirmer Books. 240 pp. $19.95.

Mozart's *Requiem* was not only *by* Mozart, it was, in the deepest sense, *for* Mozart. The last of the composer's creations, the *Requiem's* mysterious commissioning and even its questioned authorship have added to the romantic legend that grew through the 19th century and blossomed in this decade about the death of the 35-year-old composer in 1791.

Mozart had lain rather quietly in his unmarked grave in the Viennese suburb of Saint Marx until Peter Shaffer put his play *Amadeus* onstage in 1980. Shaffer, using the legend and facts of Mozart's death, revived the rumor that Mozart was poisoned by Antonio Salieri, court *Kapellmeister* and archrival in Vienna's politicized musical scene. Suddenly Mozart's death was hot news again, and the investigation was reopened by doctors of medicine and musicology.

H.C. Robbins Landon, whose prodigious exhumations of Haydn's music and documents have produced some of the most joyously readable scholarship around, has turned his energies to detailing Mozart's last year. His exuberant probing has brought together long-hidden documents that remove some of the mystery surrounding Mozart's death, his chronic money problems, his work on the *Requiem* and on the final two operas, *La clemenza di Tito* and *Die Zauberflote*.

And Constanze, Mozart's wife has existed all these years behind a scrim through which was seen the outline of a lightheaded and flirtatious woman, wrong for the composer's well-being. Landon shows that, once free of her husband's smothering demands and her father-in-law's disapproval, Constanze was a resourceful survivor who raised the two children and saw to the performance of the operas, the publication of many of the manuscripts and the writing and printing of the earliest authoritative Mozart biography, by her second husband, Georg von Nissen.

Mozart's last year was prodigious. After pawning his silver, he had rushed off to Frankfurt in the last months of 1790 to join in the coronation of Leopold II. He had performed, but the trip had not produced either the money or the imperial recognition he desired. His return to Vienna was tinged with desperation, although he still had prospects.

One was an invitation to London. Johann Peter Salomon, a musician who had settled in London, had stormed Vienna to secure Haydn's appearance in London in 1790, and to invite Mozart for the following season. The London concerts made Haydn rich and famous, and might have done the same for Mozart.

Unfinished portrait of Mozart, by Joseph Lange, from 1789-90.

Mozart threw himself into some immediate projects. He wrote music for the royal dances: 78 minuets and German dances, a piano concerto and a final set of string quartets. He was angling for an appointment as music director of St. Stephen's Cathedral, and turned to writing church music as his entree — a *Kyrie* and the *Ave verum corpus*.

Then his activity with the Masonic lodges in Vienna led him to write cantatas, including one he completed in his last days, having taken a few days away from the *Requiem* to complete it.

By early summer, Mozart had been visited by the mysterious emissary who asked for a *Requiem*, urged speed and agreed to pay well. But he had also received a commission — he was second choice — for a coronation opera for Prague. He wrote at white heat, rushed off to Prague and saw the opera, *La clemenza*, onto the stage in August and early September. By then, he had finished *Die Zauberflote*, for performance in a suburban commercial theater, and was hurrying to complete the *Clarinet Concerto*.

Landon studied watermarks to establish the order in which parts of *La clemenza* were written, just as he did for the *Requiem*. Mozart's pace and intensity are difficult to imagine, and contemporary accounts speak of an exhausted composer, pressed for money, worried about his wife's health, apprehensive about the commission for the *Requiem*.

As the year waned, Mozart saw *Die Zauberflote* become a hit. Landon shows that he worked only from Oct. 8 to Nov. 20 on the *Requiem*, minus time to compose his *Masonic Cantata*. The symptoms of his final illness appeared suddenly, on Nov. 18, and by Dec. 5, he was dead. Poisoned by the jealous Salieri? No, despite Salieri's raving confession before his own death in a madhouse.

Modern physicians have studied the evidence of symptoms, and determined that Mozart suffered from a streptococcal infection and kidney failure, a cerebral hemorrhage and pneumonia. The kind of kidney disease he had exhibited no early symptoms that doctors of the time would have recognized.

After a mass at St. Stephen's, Mozart was buried in an unmarked grave in the suburbs. No one accompanied the body.

Landon calls his death the "greatest tragedy in the history of music." The book's vigor certainly argues for the importance of his last year. Landon is a keen archival detective, but also a humanist for whom letters and papers sketch living human beings. His writing fairly cheers at the discovery of confirming letters, and his book increases understanding of a long-obscured musical puzzle.

Daniel Webster is an Inquirer music critic.

China's slapdash approach to adopting Western ways

Reviewed by
James Chan

DISCOS AND DEMOCRACY,
China in the Throes of Reform
Orville Schell
Pantheon Books. 384 pp. $19.95

To a visitor from the West, China can appear, as Orville Schell says, like "someone who begins putting up a kitchen shelf and, without quite intending to, knocks down a wall, builds another room, and then, still without any architectural drawings, finally, bit by bit, ends up remodelling the whole house."

This piecemeal fashion in which China adopts material and ideological aspects of Western civilization is the subject of Orville Schell's new book on China, *Discos and Democracy*.

In it, Schell, a journalist who has frequently visited and written about China in the last 15 years, offers a perceptive and analytical account of how China is accepting, and resisting, the Western world in the late 1980s.

He begins in February 1987, sitting in front of the Peking University Library on the pedestal of a massive gray statue of Mao Tse-tung, who once said, "If you read too many books, in the end they will petrify your mind." The statue is gone now, but at the time it struck him as a fine symbol of the irony and incongruity abundant in China since Mao's revolution.

Schell, in looking at China's course since the death of Mao, takes an informal and anecdotal approach. The book is divided into six rather loosely related parts, each containing short narratives that can be read independently. These many stories relate to the central theme of the "Westernization" of China and the way in which the Chinese embrace it and reject it simultaneously.

The people and events Schell depicts suggest that China wants a new political structure — of which democracy is an important part — but that its creation is thwarted by the various conservative factions that constitute the still all-powerful Communist Party.

The Chinese don't feel that the ancient Confucian model of an orderly society can be adapted to these times. Absolute monarchy as a form of government is history. "Marxism, Leninism and Mao Tse-tung's Thought" worked for a while but lost its credibility after 10 years of turmoil brought on by the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Western colonialism and oppression are still bitter memories to those who founded Mao's China and still wield considerable influence in the leadership. China is waiting for a new ideology.

Meanwhile, like someone who cannot quite figure out what he wants but wants to have it all, China is trying everything. As a result, it has taken in a mixed bag of Western objects, practices and ideas — bikinis, body building, cosmetic surgery, disco, fashion, Freud, golf, guns, Kentucky Fried Chicken, laws on corporate bankruptcy and limousines.

But cultures rarely mingle well without getting bent a little — or a lot — out of shape, and *Discos and Democracy* is largely a description of the way in which China transforms what it takes from the West into something foreign to everyone.

Despite the title, Schell apparently did not spend much time hanging out at discos. Rather, he has been talking to a relatively small minority of younger liberal-minded intellectuals. Through them, he traces the ebb and flow of the idea of democracy within China since it opened its door in the late 1970s.

This group argues that democracy is the essential cure to China's economic backwardness and cultural stagnancy. The book focuses on the life and thoughts of three principal proponents of democracy — the physicist Fang Lizhi and the writers Liu Binyan and Wang Ruowang.

From the book jacket

Liu Binyan believes that the Chinese Communist Party should allow public criticisms of its policy. He argues that people who care to criticize are more loyal than those who remain silent. He has singled out corrupt and arrogant officials and compared them to "parasites ... who blighted the socialist system like an infestation of cankerworms."

Wang Ruowang attacks not only the party but its ideology, claiming that "the capitalist mode of production is precisely what China needs."

Fang Lizhi, the most outspoken of the three, goes even further, contending that "Marxism ... is like a worn-out dress that should be discarded."

Needless to say, such public frankness has not met with love and admiration from the older generation of conservatives, veterans of the Long March who fought the Japanese, banished to Taiwan the Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek, and founded the People's Republic. These people still run China.

Yet the liberal-minded intellectuals who advocate various degrees of democracy have not suffered the severe persecution that afflicted those who spoke out in the late 1950s. Though booted out of the party, Fang Lizhi still travels to the West, gives lectures and airs his views. Liu Binyan, who is now a visiting lecturer at UCLA, recently published his view on political reforms in China in the New York Times.

Discos and Democracy offers scant insight into village life or that of the vast majority of city dwellers. It is an account by an American of the sentiments and aspirations of the small group of people who relate to the West and seek out contact with visitors. It is impossible to know whether such people will turn out to be the architects of the new China, but Schell does offer a series of intriguing glimpses of some of the many ways in which the country is changing.

James Chan is a Philadelphia-based consultant. He writes a column on how to deal with Westerners for a business newspaper published in China.

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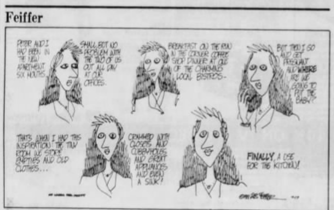

Stream-of-consciousness riffs that slam a nation of hicks

Reviewed by
Steven Rea

L.A. IS THE CAPITAL OF KANSAS
Richard Meltzer
Harmony Books. 246 pp. $16.95

Richard Meltzer, who used to be a rock critic — a genuinely grumpy, iconoclastic rock critic whose 1970 thesis, *The Aesthetics of Rock* (reissued by Da Capo Press last year), remains a seminal work of all-over-the-road, highbrow-meets-Lowenbrau pop-culture commentary — migrated to Los Angeles 13 years ago from New York City.

From the Big Apple to the Big Orange. From "living between the headphones for four years" and wailing passionately in print about early albums by the likes of Dylan, the Beatles, the Stones, to dismissing rock altogether, even as he co-wrote songs for one of rock's most pretentious metal bands, Blue Oyster Cult (hey, everybody's got to eat).

In a Los Angeles Times interview last year, Meltzer explained his weariness with — and wariness of — contemporary pop. "Music has become capitalist dog food," he said, "and though there might be decent cuts once in a while, there are no decent trends. There used to be elements of accident and risk in live rock shows — in fact, those were the primary characteristics — but now they all turn in polished performances."

"Originally rock-and-roll was about liberation," he added, "and was very anti-fashion. Then with the ascendancy of people like Elton John and Bowie in the '70s, the message became, 'Let's bring back conformity and pretend that it's a certain kind of dance.'"

So Meltzer chucked his headphones, pulled on some pants (Meltzer's rock criticism reads like he wrote it in his underwear) and walked outside. What he saw there — namely the sprawling smogapolis known as Los Angeles — made him sick. And what made him sick is what's been collected in *L.A. Is the Capital of Kansas*.

Its subtitle is "Painful Lessons in Post-New York Living." Its subtext is that basically we are a nation of morons.

In these 40 pieces, most of them written as columns for two Angeleno alternative weeklies (the Reader and the Weekly), Meltzer rails against *everything*: the self-actualization movement ("Barber Shop Zen," in which he encounters a hairdresser who once snipped est-founder Werner Erhard's head); moviemaking ("Mutant Like Me" — Meltzer gets a bit part in a Roger Corman movie); the male obsession with mammaries (in which our fearless writer draws the correlation between his age — 39 at the time, he's 42 now — and Jayne Mansfield's bust size); TV (Meltzer wrote TV criticism of a kind — he couldn't stand watching it); and sports (a short stint as a stringer for the Japanese edition of Sports Illustrated — an unsatisfying stint, his editors insisting on "easy-translatable copy"); and so on, so forth and so it goes.

Meltzer's writing is from-the-hip and off-the-top-of-the-head. He sidetracks, but rarely derails. His prose is riddled with STUFF ALL IN CAPS and personal shorthand ("civ" is civilization, "sez" is says). Words collide with each other the way he thinks them, not the way we're accustomed to reading them.

Comparisons to gonzo scribe Hunter S. Thompson and L.A.'s resident gadfly/barfly/fly-by-night poet-/novelist Charles Bukowski have been made, and made aptly. So too, to greater and lesser degree, William S. Burroughs (raw sex), Tom Wolfe (keen social observation) and Timothy Leary (frayed synapses).

But Meltzer has a mind of his own, and it's all over these pages. In his title essay, he makes the strong case that L.A. is nothing but a town full of hicks — and seeing how what happens in L.A. happens in the rest of America a few years later (witness those fold-out auto sun shields just hitting Philadelphia — they were the rage in L.A. five years ago) — it is therefore the capital of Hickdom, and thus the book's title. (And thus the reason to read this book, even if you've never set foot in Southern California.)

In his own twisted, irascible, irrational way, Richard Meltzer makes a lot of sense.

Inquirer staff writer Steven Rea had his own painful lessons in post-New York living, in L.A., San Francisco and Iowa City.

Mixed bag of Bradbury stories

Reviewed by
Ken Kalfus

THE TOYNBEE CONVECTOR
Ray Bradbury
Alfred A. Knopf. 295 pp. $17.95

The 23 tales collected in *The Toynbee Convector* include, by my count, two science-fiction stories, 10 tales of the supernatural and 11 conventional stories whose only fantasy lies in their hyperbolic romanticism. Unfortunately, few show the charm and invention that marked Ray Bradbury's early work and made him, 40 years ago, one of the best science-fiction writers of his generation.

Bradbury, 68, still employs an old-fashioned literary style that recalls the days when insubstantial short stories could be sold for substantial sums to such commercial magazines as Colliers and the Saturday Evening Post. Like much of that writing, the author's current fiction is often lushly sentimental and overwritten, appealing to the young-at-heart adult. It celebrates love, hope, dreams, youth and faith in a way that makes these phenomena as incredible as his canal-cruising Martians.

Less concerned with technology than with things of the spirit, Bradbury has rarely written with conviction about the future. In *The Martian Chronicles* (1950), his rocket ships roared out of the faded past of America's supposed innocence. On Mars, his colonists erected cozy small towns of clapboard houses.

Now that the future has actually arrived — and even overstayed its welcome — Bradbury writes with little conviction about our noisy, turbocharged, laser-lit present. His latest stories are largely about uncomplicated love affairs, haunted houses and children thrilled by the circus, the whole volume smothered in a cloud of nostalgia and mysticism.

Things in Bradbury's world are always happening "somehow." His characters suddenly just "know" strange and profound truths.

This suspension of natural law allows one character to resurrect his parents and another to travel back in time through mere acts of will. It permits Bradbury to draw, in purple ink, two impossible lovers who "only stopped laughing long enough to kiss and only stopped kissing long enough to laugh at how odd and miraculous it was to find themselves with no clothes to wear in the middle of a bed as vast as life and as beautiful as morning."

Nearly every one of these stories has a "moral" that, despite its innocuousness, remains doubtful. The premise of the book's science-fiction title story, "The Toynbee Convector," is that a time traveler, upon returning from the future and reporting that wars will be abolished, poverty eradicated and the whales saved, could thereby inspire the world to make such a future a reality.

The moral comes from something the historian Arnold Toynbee once wrote: A society that doesn't run to seize the future and shape it is doomed. Maybe this is true, but the fancifulness of the story serves only to discredit the idea.

The Toynbee Convector has a few successfully lyrical moments, passages brimming with nostalgia for a future that never was. "A Love Affair" is about a young Martian, a member of a race that died out from the world of science fiction more than 20 years ago. He watches a settler from Earth through the windows of her isolated bungalow. The Earthwoman owns no CD player or futuristic home-entertainment appliance. Instead, she listens to a recording of "Ain't Misbehavin'" on a decidedly retro phonograph.

It's small touches like this that distinguish Bradbury's best work. *The Toynbee Convector* won't add to his reputation, but the luminous quality of *The Martian Chronicles* and a few other books ensures that it will travel into the future intact.

Ken Kalfus is a writer and free-lance critic living in Philadelphia.

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